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AUTHOR Reynolds, Mary Ruth; And Others
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ABSTRACT

In this study, built upon a Vygotskian perspective, play is considered an optimal context for young children's literacy learning. The study sought to gain more understanding of the process of collaboration, or assisted learning, in order to promote literacy learning within the context of young children's social pretend play. Subjects were seven 4-year-olds who chose to play in the housekeeping center of their preschool classroom. Children were videotaped during play on five consecutive days, and focus groups were conducted with the children and teacher to discuss their videotaped play. Four questions guided the research: (1) What themes are articulated or inferred to help clarify children's "sense of story?"; (2) What purposes (meanings and motivations) do children and their teachers identify with in the process of classroom story construction?; (3) How do teachers' conversations and actions contribute to children's ability to play collaboratively?; and (4) What are practical implications for responsive teaching to build upon children's emergent literacy? Results indicated that as children played and then viewed their own videotapes, they learned to appreciate the drama they had created as they reconstructed the story anew in discussion. (Includes a table of the steps in thematic analysis of focus group data, a list of recommendations for other studies of this type, and the script of one focus group.) (EV)

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"Focusing on Child-constructed Stories: Videotaping Classroom Play Centers"

Mary Ruth Reynolds and Sharon Milner
State University of West Georgia

Jim C. Fortune
Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University

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"Focusing on Child-constructed Stories:
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"I'll drive the truck
if you'll fight the fire.
I'll plunk the keys
if you'll be the choir.
I'll find the ball
if you'll call the team.
Let's put our heads together
and dream the same dream."
George Ella Lyon (1989)

These words from Together, an award-winning children's book, are a poetic illustration of sociodramatic play, a form of collaborative pretense, (Howes, 1992). The collective dramas created in play contexts offer rich opportunities to study children's "sense of story" called narrative competence by Martinez, Cheney, and Teale(1991). Children's narrative competence, or story construction, then, is part of a literacy learning process in which verbal thought develops.

According to Vygotsky (1978), language and thought are interrelated so that each contributes to the other as children become more literate and their verbal thought develops. He

viewed play as an essential context for child learning (Vygotsky, 1967). Therefore, for this study which is built upon a Vygotskian perspective, play is considered an optimal context for young children's literacy learning.

Literacy, i.e., forms of communication which include listening, speaking, reading and writing, evolves naturally among young children in a developmentally appropriate environment. When the environment facilitates healthy development of literacy skills, it invites children to build upon the skills they possess. Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development described children's areas of skill development in which they progressed with assistance. We sought to gain more understanding of the process of collaboration, or assisted learning to promote literacy learning within the context of young children's social pretend play.

Methodology

Our research included a facilitation technique for "storying" Reynolds (1994) which combined videotaping with focus group methodology. This qualitative study allowed children to view tapes of their "story playing" and to discuss their meanings of the play. Child-adult group discussions , then, allowed new opportunities for story building as children "played with ideas" to create new stories.

Subjects

Subjects for this study were self-selected within a four-year-old class enrolled in a Southern University Child Development Center. Seven children and their teacher participated in the videotaped focus group discussed in this paper. They were largely from upper middle class Caucasian families. The children chose to play in the housekeeping center, a site selected for taping due to its general application to preschool classrooms.

Research Questions

Following are the questions guiding this research:

1. What themes are articulated or inferred to help clarify children "sense of story"?
2. What purposes, I.e. meanings and motivations do children and their teachers identify with the process of classroom story construction?
3. How do teachers' conversations and actions contribute to children's ability to play collaboratively?
4. What are practical implications for responsive teaching to build upon children's emergent literacy?

Data Collection

Qualitative data were collected by videotaping and focus groups. For five consecutive days, beginning in March, 1996, the first author combined observation with videotaping of the four year old's housekeeping center and the children played

there. Observations lasted approximately one and one half hours until the class began their "clean-up time" . After they helped to clean up, the group met to discuss their center play activities. During that time the children who had been involved in housekeeping center play were invited to enter a nearby classroom where a television was provided for viewing their play.

Our research included a facilitation technique for "storying" Reynolds (1994) which combined videotaping with focus group methodology. This qualitative study allowed children to view tapes of their "story playing" and to discuss their meanings of the play.

First, a planning focus group introduced the concept of classroom videotaping to teachers and assistants at the center. The Center staff who were directly involved with four year olds were invited to share ideas and preferences concerning the study.

Then, parents were invited to attend a question/answer session about the study and to formally consent to their child's participation. Next, child-adult group discussions allowed new opportunities for story building as children "played with ideas" about videotaping to create new stories.

Data Analysis

Strauss and Corbin's (1990) qualitative paradigm was used for analysis of researcher notes and videotapes. Tapes were scanned repeatedly (at least three times), and selected segments (of at least 10 minutes in length) were transcribed as story themes and play interactions were identified. In order for interactions to be analyzed, they must include at least two players. Table 1 outlines steps in the process of thematic analysis of focus group data. Scripts were color-coded for categories which reflect player interactions. (See Appendix A for Focus Group Script) in which the child-identified theme of "Doctor, Doctor" was discussed.

At the end of the fifth session a follow-up taping was offered to the whole class. In that way all children had an opportunity to see themselves on tape and to respond to the class discussion which was the study's culminating activity with the children.

Finally, teachers and researchers discussed their perceptions of the children's story playing. We viewed the tapes and evaluated the value of this type of classroom research for future projects.

Conclusions

We concluded that videotaping and focus groups offer a challenging research strategy for teachers and others interested in young children's emergent literacy. It is important to allow children an exploratory opportunity for "hands-on" discovery and conversation about the videocamera. Then, as co-players, adults may be actors with children or may facilitate focus group discussion. Each new opportunity for "story playing" will be unique as adults respond to the themes created by children in play. From their playing and viewing their

own videotapes, children learn to appreciate the drama they have created as they reconstruct the story anew in discussion

Table 2 provides a list or recommendations for those who may be interested in designing a similar study using videotaping technology combined with child/adult focus groups as a responsive classroom activity for literacy learning.

Table 1

Steps in Process of Thematic Analysis of Focus Group Data

Organization of Data	Transcription of Tapes
Review Transcripts	Researcher(s) code perceptions
Formation of Analysis	Driven by Group Membership Responses to Research Q's
Collaboration	Researcher comparisons-notes
Report Writing	Conclusions/Recommendations
Follow-up to conclusions	Development of New Research Ideas
Conduct Focus Group Models	Modify research by new themes

Table 2 Recommendations

1. Allow questions/exploration of camera.
2. Set consistent limits for taping.
3. Invite children to participate.
4. Confirm child-identified play themes.
5. Revise plans based upon child/teacher discussions.

Appendix A

Focus Group

(The focus group takes place in a classroom across the hall from play centers. Seven children are seated on the floor where they can view the tv and be near the researcher seated in front of them. Their teacher is in background.)

Script

Adult:
"Who can tell me some of the stories you were playing?"
Children:

"I was playing dog, dog, and hospital, hospital.

Adult: "I saw some of that going on."

"I was playing doctor, doctor and store, store.

"I was playing dog with Miss D.
Miss D. was my mommy.
A. "Is that right! If you talk one at the time, I really can hear you great."

C. "My name was Puddles."

A. "What happened when you were playing doctor?"

Children:
"I found a piece of gold." Boy throws "gold".

C."We gave it to him."

C."Me and T. gave it to him."

Boy puts piece of gold on his head.

Adult:When you were playing doctor, tell me something that happened?

Giggles

Adult:"I think that gold is getting in the way of our talk.

Children's teacher takes "gold".

A."Well, what happened when you were playing doctor?"

Children:
"I was giving shots, shots, shots,"

Adult:"I saw her go to sleep. Did the shots make her sleepy? Was there another kind of shot? Would you like to see what it looks like?"

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